



The “How To’s” of Using a Known Egg Donor

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The decision to use a donor egg can be a difficult one for couples. Choosing this option inevitably involves grieving over the loss of one’s biological connection to a child. However, the donor egg option enables the recipient to still be able to experience pregnancy, have some control over the gestational environment, and have a baby that is genetically related to at least one member of the couple.

A further issue involves deciding whether to use a known or unknown donor. For some couples, the use of a known donor offers many advantages. If the donor is a relative, especially a sister, there can be a comfort in using gametes from the same genetic pool. This can help the recipient to feel a stronger biological connection to the baby. In addition, recipients often feel more in control and less uncertain, as they have more information about the donor than in an anonymous situation. Finally, there may be a shorter waiting time to begin the process, as opposed to the possibility of a lengthy wait for an anonymous donor.

For some couples, however, the use of a known donor may raise a number of concerns, such as:

- ❖ Will the donor feel coerced or compelled to say yes when she really wants to say no?
- ❖ What are the medical risks to the donor?
- ❖ If the donor is married, how does her spouse feel about it?
- ❖ What will the donor expect of the recipient as a result of the donation?
- ❖ What will the recipient couple tell their child about the donor and what will their relationship be like?
- ❖ Will the donor be over-involved in the pregnancy or in raising the child?
- ❖ How will the recipient feel if the child strongly resembles the donor? How will the resemblance affect the donor?
- ❖ How will the current and future relationship between donor and recipient be affected by this process?

WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD DONOR

In our clinical practice we have seen some known donor situations that seem to work better than others. Both the donor and the recipient couple appear to have less concern about the future welfare of the donor if the donor has already had children of her own and, even better, if she considers her family to be complete. If the donor already has had children of her own, she understands better what she is giving. Also, if she considers her family to be complete, then the risk, however small, that the process might impact on her future fertility, would not be relevant.

One indication that the process may be successful is if the donor offers to donate without being asked. This can make for a more comfortable, less pressured situation. Another sign that bodes well is if the donor, when asked, gives an extremely positive response. We have heard donors reply with comments such as “I feel honored that you would ask” or “I feel flattered,”

initial indications that the process may work out well. Some donors have made general offers in the past, once they heard about the couple's infertility, with statements such as "if there is anything I can do to help..." These donors are sometimes relieved to discover that they "only" have to donate their eggs and not carry a pregnancy, which may have raised more concerns for them about attachment to the baby.

WHAT TO DISCUSS

Increasingly, programs require donors and recipients to meet with a counselor trained in dealing with issues of third-party reproduction to assess and help prepare the parties for the process of egg donation. The counselor can give guidance about resources for support and education, and can also raise issues about the short- and long-term implications of the donation. This is an important part of the process, and discussing these issues early on can help avert problems in the future.

One important concern for the donor and recipient couple to discuss is the issue of privacy vs. openness, especially if the donor is a relative. The more in agreement they are about how open they will be and with whom, as well as what the expectations are of the donor's future relationship with the child, the better. When family members or friends know about the donation it can be difficult to keep it a secret, and family secrets can potentially have a deleterious effect on the couple's relationship with their child. It is also useful for the donor and recipient to "try on" as much as possible different scenarios that may arise, such as what is the long-term obligation of the donor if the first cycle doesn't work, or if there is a pregnancy loss. Donors may become very invested in the outcome of the cycle, and it can be helpful to establish clear limits on what their obligation will be.

HOW TO ASK

Recipients we see in our practice often express anguish over how to ask a donor for this most precious and personal gift. They fear rejection and worry about putting a donor in a situation that she may not feel free to refuse. What often works best is when the recipient writes the donor a letter, giving her time and space to consider the option. Some recipients have spoken of giving the donor a ready "out" by saying things like "you don't even need to respond to this if you do not wish to," or letting the donor know they have back-up options. For her part, the recipient needs to be prepared that the donor might say no at first, or even later on, after meeting with a counselor. In fact, both parties need to be prepared that using a known donor is a process that needs to be carefully explored and, for any number of reasons, may not work out as concerns may arise during the psychological screening process.

HOW TO THANK

Finally, situations that work well often involve some consideration given to how the recipient will say "thank you" for what she considers to be the most precious gift of all, the opportunity to achieve a much wanted pregnancy. Recipients speak of "not knowing how to thank her...I know I'll be very grateful." Our experience indicates that people in general do enjoy and appreciate being thanked. Planning some type of a "thank you" also may lessen the tendency toward a subtle, though nonetheless on-going sense of obligation to pay back a debt on the part of the recipient. Such a gesture may instead provide some sense of closure that in the end may help restore the balance in the relationship.

In summary, building a family using donor egg has proven to be a viable, satisfying option for many. Deciding to use a known donor is a complex process with long-range implications for the donor, recipient couple and the child. What works well, from our experience, seems to be when time is taken to clarify present and future roles, obligations, and views on such important matters and privacy vs. openness. Recipients appear to feel best when donors offer. However, even when the recipient asks, donors often respond quite positively. Giving the donor the time and space to consider the option is an important part of the process. Finally, planning a thank you ritual can be an equally important part of putting closure on what is an emotionally challenging, but deeply rewarding, experience for both donor and recipient. ■

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